HORACE GREELEY: A YANKEE IN TRANSITION

BY

THEODORE FISCH

A. B., University of Illinois, 1942

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AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY
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R. UNIV. BIBLIOTHEEK LEIDEN

HORACE GREELEY: A YANKEE IN TRANSITION

It is perhaps ironic that the singular success of Horace Greeley as an editor and journalist has served in some measure to obscure his significance as a critic of nineteenth century America. Biographers and historians have turned their pens almost exclusively to a description of his journalistic career, and the popular imagination has been completely won over by the idea that the story of Greeley's life is the history of the New York *Tribune.* Even more damaging to the proper appreciation of his role in American thought is the Greeley legend—a legend that is filled with half-truths and exaggerations relative to his eccentric personality and enigmatic career. The Greeley that has been handed down to later generations is a Greeley in caricature, a Greeley with fickle and uncontrollable emotions and ideas, a Greeley who was so far removed from the main and used stream of life that it was impossible either for his contemporaries or later historians to extract logic or sequence from his life and effort. Granted the quirks of character that he undoubtedly exhibited, it is doubtful that he was more mysterious and elusive than the average man who is continually before the public eye. If any generalizations are to be made about the man they must be to the effect that he was thoroughly human, fundamentally liberal but with a sprinkling of bigotry, basically self-assured but subject to periods of doubt, largely optimistic but capable of a brooding pessimism.

Born on February 3, 1811, in Amherst, New Hampshire, and issued from plain and Puritan stock, his early life was an object lesson in Yankee perseverance and ambition. After a multitude of jobs as a printer, he launched his newspaper career in 1834 with the publication of the *New Yorker,* a magazine of literary and general intelligence. His political apprenticeship was served under Thurlow Weed, boss of the Whig machine in New York, when in 1838 and 1840 he

undertook the editing of the *Jeffersonian* and *Log Cabin* respectively, two campaign organs of the Whig party. While Greeley was thoroughly Whiggish on substantive questions of a political nature, he early exhibited an independence of thought regarding the choice of political candidates, and especially concerning the larger problems of basic social and economic reform. His recusancy in these details cost him the favor of regular and conservative Whigs, and ultimately led to his being read out of the party. It was characteristic of Greeley that he persevered in his thought and that he utilized the *Tribune* for the propagation of his own ideas.

As a critic of his times Greeley dealt almost automatically with the problems occasioned by the transition first from an agricultural to an industrial society and then from a primitive to a monopoly form of capitalistic economy. With his Puritan and Yankee backgrounds he developed a real respect for the standard middle class virtues and an appreciation of the fundamental precepts of Christian justice. The industrialization of the United States, attended as it was with the material and moral debasement of large segments of the population, moved him to a social, economic, and religious criticism of the basis of American life.

Greeley's entrance into the reform and humanitarian movements of the middle-century can be largely explained in sociological terms. The forties was a decade charged with the electricity of reform. It was an era in which countless panaceas and fads made their appearance, each with its own remedy and emphasis. Sects and theories—Millerites, Owenites, Grahamites, the celibates of Zoar, the worshippers of Henry Ward Beecher, the cold water crusaders, and Fourier's phalansterists—mushroomed in breathtaking numbers. Differing widely in their prescriptions, they all reflected the concern of the period with reform and the redemption of man. All of them recognized a wrong, and most were optimistic of the future and of the possibilities inherent in man. Religious fervor and faith in

the possibility of progress characterized the intellectual ferment of the times. The forties, glorious and human, wise and childlike, perplexed and exultant, was a decade of self-criticism, but nevertheless one that breathed an exhilirant air of hope and optimism. Perhaps the gushing spirit of this era has never been equalled in our history.

It was to this overloaded stage, groaning beneath the weight of so many performers, that Greeley brought his Yankee daring and enterprise, his Puritan sense of justice, and his generous supply of sympathy for the toiling masses. It may be said that he had no original genius, and, as Emerson had noted, that he was an eclectic, but the pattern of his thought was stamped with his own unmistakable trade-mark. His thinking was characterized by an astonishing universalism and by a fervent faith in the possibilities of the unshackled mind. He was a meeting point for all the diverse currents of humanitarian and democratic opinion of his age, temperance and education, land and labor reform, antislavery, Fourierism, and countless others. It would be difficult to find a more representative figure in nineteenth century America. With the daily and weekly *Tribune,* reaching as it did outside of New York city and into New England and the rural areas of the Middle West, he exerted a powerful influence on the mind of his generation and gained an unusual measure of personal popularity. That Lincoln and Emerson, rather than Greeley, have emerged as the heroes of the democratic faith in America is due more to temperament and the accidents of fate than to any deep-seated difference in the quality of their thought. Greeley abjured cynicism, religious bigotry, nativism, racial prejudice, and aristocratic notions of inequality. To a large extent he brought to bear on the problems of the day the same liberal spirit, the same faith in the possibilities of man, and the same conviction that the nation had a democratic destiny.

The juices of the spiritual and humane ran deeply in Greeley. To a great degree he was motivated by a religious

sentiment and by a benevolent and philanthropic character. The factor that was common to many of the reformers of this period whose religious sensibilities were outraged was their idealism. It was not by a better government, a truer organization of society, or a common sharing of property that these persons hoped to secure a truer kind of living, but rather by an inner reformation, a closer union of the individual with God. The transcendentalist appeal, with its emphasis upon the need for spiritual regeneration on the part of the individual, had a marked influence on Greeley, but it was equally characteristic of him that he conceived of reform as a mass movement, a movement whose source and inspiration was to be found in the life of the people. To his moral training was added a practical effectiveness by reason of his social consciousness and his belief that the individual was morally obligated to participate in the great work of reform. The dualism of Greeley's faith—the blending of innate ideas with experience—was the cardinal feature of his reform ideology.

He turned to a criticism of the mores of the industrial community. The essence of his criticism was that the business classes had abandoned the principles of Christian social justice, and that they had turned their backs on the less gifted and less fortunate classes. It was only too evident that the amassers of wealth had stooped to the worship of the god Mammon. The material world had forsaken the Christian ideal. A nation blinded by the glitter of gold and silver had lost sight of the higher considerations. Greeley charged that a fiercely competitive spirit had replaced the concept of cooperation. He censured the world of traffic for producing a get-rich-quick mania and a mundane philosophy. It had created a distorted, mean, and twisted individual. It was patent to Greeley that there was an underlying rottenness in a society that spewed a selfish and egoistical morality.

It was Greeley's religious faith that awakened him and

drove him relentlessly forward in the paths of a reformer. While he had not been trained in any particular religious creed, he had as a youth adopted the Universalist faith. This liberal and optimistic persuasion had opened up a new world to him. Gone were the seeds of doubt, pessimism, and cynicism. He was enthralled by the conviction that a merciful God showered his blessings on all men. The democratic East and frontier could find no fault with his religion.

Greeley's concept of the social role of the church was a reaction against the complacency that had sapped the vigor of many of the established churches. He believed that the church must be more than a teacher of theology and philosophical abstractions. Religion was envisaged as a dynamic and active agent for social improvement. A religion gone seedy, having ceased to be a living faith, was useless. He urged the clergy to lead the way in applying the principles of the faith to life itself. He condemned a ministry that subserved the greedy interests of the ruling class. His plea was for the church to assume the leading role in the war against every form of oppression and prejudice.

The America that Greeley envisioned was a democratic commonwealth of small, independent producers, industrial and agricultural. Indeed, he reflected to the fullest the historical development of capitalism in the United States along the lines of the small producer. It was this process that he idolized, both on economic and religious grounds. A thriving community of independent and self-reliant producers was the necessary basis for the individual prototype that he propounded for America. In this respect he followed the Jeffersonian tradition and reflected the Jacksonian spirit, although he hardly would have admitted the latter in view of his Whig connections.

The economic and social milieu in which Greeley matured serve to explain his role as the champion of the industrialization and capitalization of the United States on the pattern

of the small entrepeneur community. His country, rapidly losing its agricultural flavor in the face of shop and factory, was being torn by antagonistic classes of employers and employees. The union of classes and sections born out of the Revolution was fast evaporating. Farmer stood pitted against industrialist, worker against capitalist, East against West, North against South—a circus of animosities and hatreds. A large part of the population was reduced to poverty and humiliation despite the increase in the national wealth. Here indeed was a paradox to ponder.

The apparently unlimited horizons of the youthful nation tended to preclude a Marxian approach on the part of Greeley. Added to this was the fact that there was a conservative streak in Greeley that repelled any idea of a radical alteration in the economic relationships of existing classes. His answer reflected the optimism of America's economic climate. It was not that of the back-to-the-farm advocate, for he was ever enthralled by his faith in an industrial democracy. The solution he offered was the extension of the property-holding ideal so as to include precisely those who were without the means of production, and to substitute a cooperative for a competitive economy. These proposals were outside the pale of conformity because they ran counter to the ultimate development of American economy, but in no wise were they Marxian or socialistic in the modern sense.

Greeley's conviction that moral and material progress could only obtain in a social organization with cooperative rather than competitive foundations led him to champion the cause of Fourierism in the United States. Greeley made a significant contribution to what success the Fourierite movement enjoyed in this country, particularly in the Brook Farm and North American phalanxes. His adoption of the doctrine of Association was almost natural in view of his moral tendencies and the condition of American economy. Here was a socialism that had none of the radical features

that might antagonize his really deep-seated aversion to violent changes in economic and social relationships, while at the same time it seemed to solve the problems of monopoly and unemployment. It is important to stress the point that Fourierism was not socialism as it is defined today, with its implication of natural class hostility and the abolition of private property. Fourierism, in its most radical sense, was no more than cooperative capitalism. Hence its appeal to Greeley, with its emphasis upon the basic unity and harmony of interests that its supporters believed to exist between economic classes. It seemed to offer the opportunity for everyone to become a worker-capitalist, which to Greeley was an important feature in an ideal economic system. Fourierism postulated no political revolution; it proposed no destruction of private property, but rather the extension of that essentially capitalistic form of economy to embrace those who were made propertyless as a result of the anarchical development of unrestrained competitive capitalism.

Historically Fourier's system was utopian, but it is significant that Greeley was able to accept the doctrine for no other reason than that to him it expressed and upheld the best features of real life in America. It was not Fourier's cosmic abstractions on the Passions and Harmonies that attracted Greeley—he was too concerned with realities for that and there is no evidence that he ever understood them—but rather Fourier's unwitting reflection of the still prevailing ideal in America of a democratic and ethical society of small producers. It was Greeley's purpose to arrest the process of the extinction of the small business community, and in this principle lay the basis of his sympathy with Association.

The reorganization of society on the cooperative principle was Greeley's considered solution of the time-worn problems of liberty, order, and justice that had ever been the concern of philosophers and political theorists. Greeley believed that order and justice could only obtain if the Christian

ideals of social consciousness and cooperation replaced the egoistic and competitive spirit of unfettered capitalism as it was developing in the United States. The very simplicity and immediateness of the joint stock formula, as a means of supplanting the competitive ideal and of halting the historical process of monopolization and the extinction of the independent worker-producer, appealed to Greeley's practical nature. He considered Association a simple and peaceable solution, a plan that was acceptable to all classes. It was a marked characteristic of Fourierism in the United States that it was presented as a panacea not only for the propertyless worker but for the capitalist and landlord as well. Greeley fully realized that worker and capitalist were in the role of antagonists, but to him this was not intrinsic to capitalist economy but only a result of the mismanagement and disorganization of industry. He pointed with equal vehemence to the fact that in this insane competitive system worker competed with worker and capitalist was set against capitalist. It was the appearance of total disunity that provoked his criticism, and his remedy was the establishment of a harmony of interests on the basis of a cooperative society.

To Greeley the problem of social and economic change and reorganization was a matter of human will and understanding. It is this concept that is the refuge and the source of hope for the utopian. As an incorrigible optimist Greeley acted on his belief that the business community could be convinced of the necessity and desirability of a transformation of society. Here, indeed, was a Yankee idealist who sensed a changing America and who tried to perpetuate the best in middle class morality by intercepting the course of American economy. The hope that captains of industry would accept a change of their own accord was a utopian illusion, but the idealism that he and others expressed remains a part of our philosophical inheritance.

The most important of Greeley's much-discussed "isms"

was nationalism. It is as an expression of the robust spirit and phenomenal development of nineteenth century America that Greeley's contribution to American thought assumes its fullest significance. The hope and energy that abounded in the nation were the qualities most fully reflected in his thought and entire career. Nothing was more indigenous to him, and nothing was more consistently propounded by him, than his vision of the democratic and prosperous destiny of the United States. The pride, and even vanity, of nationhood was common to Americans of the middle-century; this exalted sense of national consciousness had penetrated even the rural areas of New Hampshire and gripped the future editor when he was yet a mere boy. Probably as much as any thinker or writer of his era he echoed the fundamentals of American life.

The distinguishing feature of Greeley's nationalism was its democratic and many-sided quality. Nationalism or patriotism in the nineteenth century meant one or more of any number of things. It might express itself in the dream of manifest destiny and foreign conquest; it might center in devotion to the flag and Constitution; or it might find nourishment in the economic development of the nation and in the attainment of a genuine political democracy. In Greeley's heart and brain this confidence in the young republic was a democratic nationalism, remarkable for its profound meaning and universality. It was from economic, social, and religious considerations that Greeley's nationalism took its departure. Stripped of narrow chauvinism, it emerged as a genuine faith in the enlightened role of the United States as a world influence and as a model of democracy, recognizing the rights and considerations due to other nations and peoples. Devoid of conscious class bias and studded throughout with the reformer's dream of class harmony and unity, it was a plea for the fullest prosperity for all economic groups. Unencumbered by sectional hatreds, it sought the geographical and political unity that Greeley considered essential to national development. Weighted with

religious sentiment and social consciousness, it was meant to lay the basis for an ethical and democratic society.

Democratic nationalism gave character and meaning to Greeley's entire social and economic philosophy. His support of land and labor reform and his proposals for the democratic peopling of the West were not the pleadings of a class or sectional protagonist but the logical pronouncements of a thorough nationalist. The elevation of the working class and the democratic utilization of the frontier were practical measures for national development. Similarly, in the field of economic theory, Greeley ardently campaigned for the tariff principle because he believed that government sponsorship of industry through a protective policy was necessary for the attainment of maximum production and prosperity for all classes in the United States. His interest was far wider and more humane than the narrow concern for the profits of the manufacturers. The tariff was acceptable to him because he thought it would lay the foundations for industrial development, increased employment, and the diffusion of wealth.

Here is the choicest evidence of the fact that Greeley was a transitional figure, reflecting two conflicting trends in America. On the one hand, he represented the humanitarian and utopian sentiment that reacted violently against the industrial process which was accompanied by the impoverishment and moral degeneration of the working class, while on the other, he was the unsurpassed spokesman for the industrial revolution and reflected the growing spirit of economic nationalism. From the standpoint of modern working class theory Greeley was naive in projecting his overwhelming passion for the ideal of harmony into actual conditions and in interpreting the tariff principle on the basis of this imaginary unity between economic classes. One might be tempted to conclude that he had little to contribute to the Jacksonian analysis. But this is patently denied by his reform ideology. It is simply impossible to identify him

wholly and definitively with a particular school of thought.

Greeley's economic nationalism led him not only to reject the theory of *laissez faire* in world trade, which he identified with Adam Smith and the classical school of economists, and which he denounced as an apology for a dog-eat-dog economic system, but also moved him to reject the principle of an unlimited and unrestrained internal system of economy. Here Greeley was obliged to deal with the function of the state and the relationship of the individual to his government. The most obvious expression of the rejection in America of the teachings of Smith, Ricardo, Mill, and Malthus, centered in the question of the tariff, but in essence it concerned these other, more fundamental problems. Mathew Carey, his son, Henry Carey, and Greeley led the way in the revolt against the classical economists. They believed that Malthus and Ricardo had defined an economic and governmental system that was coldly and brutally deterministic. Malthus's theory of population, Ricardo's theory of rent, and the iron law of wages were inadmissible under the optimistic conditions inherent in the relatively raw and undeveloped state of American economy. As a defense against British competition, and as a basis for the development of the national economy, Greeley helped in the definition of an economic system which today would be called national planning, involving protection, internal improvements, and a well-managed currency.

But Greeley went beyond the economic sphere. He was one of the first Americans to develop a systematic proposal for the positive state. Government, he maintained, should look to the diffusion of morality and education, should guarantee full employment to the people, should widen its functions to include the maintenance of schools, postal systems, and other undertakings for the public welfare, should assume the responsibility for the relief of the poor; in a word, it should underwrite the welfare and progress of the commonwealth. As early as 1835 Greeley had formulated

the philosophical justification for this system. In 1839, at a time when Henry Carey was still championing the cause of *laissez faire* in the United States, Greeley submitted a fairly comprehensive argument in opposition to that theory.

Greeley was able to reject *laissez faire* and the theory of restricted government, which he associated with Bentham, Hazlitt, Smith, and others, on moral grounds. He was convinced that *laissez faire* was an apology for the avarice and ambition of the strong, that it was inimical to the spirit and to the cultural and intellectual level of the age, and that as such it was a pagan philosophy to which he could never adhere. Thus, while he prophesized a golden industrial era, he denounced the theory of the non-interfering state, a thesis which was, ironically enough, the historical apology for the rise of the industrial capitalist class. It is worthwhile to consider that the economic nationalists of today, if one can use the term in a narrower sense, in their attempts to serve the interests of the manufacturers have rejected in principle the religious and humanitarian equations inherent in Greeley's democratic nationalism, save for the protective tariff.

Greeley cannot be denied his place alongside the contributors to the national democratic tradition. He was a Yankee with more than a cupful of idealism, and a man who conceived of himself as the champion of social and economic democracy. In an era when the democratic values of the eighteenth century and of the American Revolution were threatened with oblivion he reaffirmed the progressive faith and sought to maintain its applicability in an industrial culture. But the path of a transition missionary is fraught with hazards; and Greeley's was no exception. To many who were absorbed by the day-by-day job of earning a living he emerged as a fruitless visionary; to others less sensible of the need for reform he appeared either as an enigmatic crank or as a dangerous revolutionary. That he was entirely neither is now evident, but it was not always apparent to

his contemporaries. But more relevant than the legends of personal eccentricities with which he was surrounded and dismissed by so many of his contemporaries was the fact that the irresistible tide of American industrial development engulfed him and cast him up on the shores of oblivion. This is so often the fate of reformers: this was the fate of Greeley. Happily they are sometimes rescued from futility by the newly-found appreciation of later generations.

VITA

Theodore Fisch was born at Newark, New Jersey, on April 16, 1920. He was educated in the Newark public schools, and in February, 1939, he enrolled in Upsala College, East Orange, New Jersey. In September, 1939, he entered the University of Illinois, from where he was graduated in June, 1942, with highest honors. From May, 1942, to April, 1944, he served in the Army of the United States. In June, 1944, he was awarded a graduate scholarship by the University of Illinois, and in 1945 he received the degree of master of arts. During the school year 1945-1946 he continued his studies as a fellow in history. Since June, 1946, he has been teaching in the University of Illinois. He is a member of Phi Kappa Phi and Alpha Kappa Delta.